MODAL VERBS

Modal verbs, sometimes called *modals*, are auxiliary verbs (helping verbs). They express such things as possibility, probability, permission and obligation.

* *Can*, *could*, *might*, *may*, *must*, *should*, *will*, *would* and *shall* are modal verbs.
* We use a modal verb before a second verb.
* Modal verbs are **not** followed by ‘to’.
* Modal verbs can have more than one meaning and usage.

**Modal verbs to express ability**

* [Can, could, was able to – modal verbs to express ability](http://speakspeak.com/resources/english-grammar-rules/modal-verbs/modal-verbs-to-express-ability)

**Modal verbs to express permission**

* [Can, can’t, could, may: modal verbs for permission](http://speakspeak.com/resources/english-grammar-rules/modal-verbs/modal-verbs-to-express-permission)

**Modal verbs to express probability and certainty (modal verbs of deduction)**

* [Present tense modal verbs of deduction: must, can’t, may, might, could](http://speakspeak.com/resources/grammar-rules/modal-verbs/present-probability-must-cant-may-might-could)
* [Past tense modal verbs of deduction: must have, can’t have, couldn’t have](http://speakspeak.com/resources/grammar-rules/modal-verbs/past-probability-must-have-cant-have-couldnt-have)

**Modal verbs to express obligation**

* [Should – to express weak obligation, advice](http://speakspeak.com/resources/grammar-rules/modal-verbs/should-to-express-obligation)
* [Should have – to express unfulfilled obligation in the past](http://speakspeak.com/resources/grammar-rules/modal-verbs/should-have-to-express-unfulfilled-past-obligation)

**Modal verbs – past tense forms and negatives**

* [Modal verbs – past tense forms](http://speakspeak.com/resources/grammar-rules/modal-verbs/modal-verbs-in-the-past)
* [Modal verbs – negative forms](http://speakspeak.com/resources/grammar-rules/modal-verbs/modal-verbs-and-negatives)
* [‘Had to’ vs. ‘must have’](http://speakspeak.com/resources/grammar-rules/modal-verbs/must-have-to)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Modal verbs to express ability** | |
| **present** | **past** |
| **can**  We use **can** when we speak about **general ability** in the present:  *Tommy can swim.  I can play the guitar. Can you play?* | **could**  We use **could** when we speak about **general ability** in the past:  *Picasso could paint when he was two. I could swim before I could walk.* |
| The negative of **can** is **can't** (cannot):   *I* ***can't*** *ski and I can't skate.* | The negative of **could** is **couldn't** (could not):   *I* ***couldn't*** *swim until I was ten.* |
| **Specific situations - can**  We also use **can** to speak about specific situations in the present:   *I can hear you but I can't see you. Can you hear me? - Yes, I can.* | **Specific situations - was able to / could**  We often use **was able to** when speaking about a **specific situation**:  *We fixed the car and then we were able to drive home.*  However, we prefer **could** to speak about a specific situation in the past when we use these verbs: **see, hear, feel, smell, taste, remember, believe, understand, decide**. *They could smell smoke.  I could understand him perfectly.* |
| **Questions about ability - present**  *How many languages* ***can you*** *speak?* ***Can you*** *name all the capitals of Europe?* | **Questions about ability - past**  ***Could you*** *write before you started school?* ***Could you*** *ride a bike when you were small?* |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Modal verbs to express asking for, giving, and refusing permission** | |
| **present or future** | **past tense** |
| **Giving permission: *can***  We use **can** when we give someone **permission** to do something: *You* ***can*** *bring a friend to the party if you want.  You* ***can*** *borrow my phone if your battery is dead.*  We also use **may** for permission. **May** is more formal and is used less often than **can**: *Passengers* ***may*** *take one small bag on board the plane.* | **Permission in the past: *could, was allowed to***  We use **could** to say that something was permitted in the past: *Many years ago you* ***could*** *smoke in cinemas, but now it's banned.*  We can also use **was/were allowed to**: *We had to wear a tie at school but we* ***were allowed to*** *take it off in hot weather.* |
| **Saying "no" - refusing permission**  We use **can't** to say that something isn't permitted: *You* ***can't*** *park here - it's private property. He* ***can't*** *drive my car; he doesn't have insurance.*  **Must not / mustn't** is also used, but is more formal and is often used on signs and in announcements: *Passengers* ***must not*** *speak to the driver while the bus is in motion.* | We use **couldn't / wasn't allowed to** to say that something was not permitted in the past:  *We* ***couldn't*** *cross the border without our passports.* |
| **Asking for permission  *can, could, may***   We use **can I?** / **could I** / **may I?** to ask for permission: ***Can I*** *speak to John Wilson, please?*  **Could** is more formal and polite than **can**: *Could I speak to John Wilson, please?*   **May** is the most formal:  *May I speak to John Wilson, please?* | **Questions about permission in the past  *was allowed to?* / *could?***   *Were you* ***allowed to*** *stay up late when you were a child?* ***Could*** *you stay up late when you were a child?* ***Could*** *people travel between East and West Berlin during the Cold War* |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Must / can't - to express probability in the present** | |
| Structure: modal + infinitive without *to* must be, must have, can't go, etc. | |
| We use **must** to express that we feel sure that something is true. | *They are really good, they* ***must*** *win.  They* ***must*** *be very rich. Look at the house.* |
| We use **can't** to say we are sure that something is impossible. | *She* ***can't*** *be ill. I've just seen her in the shop and she looked fine.  It* ***can't*** *be true. I don't believe it* |
|  |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **May / might / could - to express probability in the present** | |
| Structure: modal + infinitive without *to* may be, might do, could go, etc. | |
| We use **may** or **could** or **might** to say that it is possible that something will happen or is happening. | *They* ***may*** *be arriving tomorrow. He* ***might*** *be away on holiday. He* ***could*** *be away on holiday.  He* ***might*** *be offered the job.* |
| The negative of **may** is **may not.** The negative of **might** is **might not.**  They both mean that it is possible that something will not happen or is not happening.  We DO NOT use **could not** to express probability. | *He* ***might not*** *be offered the job.* ***I may not*** *pass the exam. I* ***might not*** *go to the match tomorrow. I go to the match tomorrow* |

The modal verb “must” has two past tense forms: “had to” and “must have”. Which form we use depends on whether we want to express obligation or if we want to say how certain we are about the probability of something happening.

This table below shows us the past tense of “must” and “have to” and when to use them.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Must / have to** | |
| **present** | **past** |
| When expressing obligation: *I must go. / I have to go.* | When expressing obligation, the past of 'must' and 'have to' is always 'had to': *I had to go.* *They had to be there at 2 o'clock.* |
| When expressing a personal opinion about probability (deduction), we use 'must' to express that we feel something is true: *He must be here.  It must be great.* | When expressing a personal opinion in the past, we use 'must have', NOT 'had to': *He must have been here.   It must have been great.* |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Must / can't / couldn't have - to express probability in the past** | |
| Structure: modal + have + past participle *must have been, can't have gone, couldn't have gone* | |
| We use **must have** to express that we feel sure that something was true. | *They* ***must have left*** *early. He* ***must have*** *already gone.* |
| We use **can't have** / **couldn't have** to say that we believe something was impossible. | *He* ***can't have escaped*** *through this window. It is too small. She* ***can't have said*** *that. She* ***couldn't have said*** *that.* |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **May / might / could have - to express probability in the past** | |
| Structure: modal + have + past participle  *may have been, could have gone, might have lost* | |
| We use **may / could / might have** to say that it was possible that something happened in the past (but we are not 100% sure). | *He* ***may have missed*** *the bus. The road* ***might have been*** *blocked.* |
| The negatives are **may** **not have** and **might not have.** | *He* ***may not have left*** *yet. The assistant* ***might not have received*** *his message* |

The modal verb *should* expresses weaker obligation than **must** and **have to**.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Should - to express obligation** | |
| Structure: should + infinitive form of a verb:  should **be**, should **go**, should **do**, etc.  We use **should** for the present and the future. We use **should** to give advice to someone and to say that something is a good idea. **Should** is weaker than **have to** and **must.** | *You* ***should******tell*** *them the truth. You* ***shouldn't smoke****, it's bad for you.  I don't think you* ***should******do*** *it.* |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Should have - to express unfulfilled obligation in the past** | |
| Structure: should + have + past participle   We use **should have** for the past. We use **should have** to say that someone didn't do something but it would have been better to do it. | *You* ***should have told*** *them the truth.  You* ***shouldn't have gone*** *there - it was a mistake.  I don't think you* ***should******have*** *done it.* |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Modal Verb** | **Meaning** | **Expressing** | **Example** |
| **must** | to have to | 100 % obligation | I must stop when the traffic lights turn red. |
| to be very probable | logical conclusion (deduction) | He must be very tired after such enormous work |
| **must not** | not to be allowed to | prohibition | You must not smoke in the hospital. |
| **can** | to be able to | ability | I can swim |
| to be allowed to | permission | Can I use your phone please? |
| it is possible | possibility | Smoking can cause cancer ! |
| **could** | to be able to | ability in the past | When I was younger I could stay up all night and not get tired.. |
| to be allowed to | more polite permission | Excuse me, could I just say something? |
| it is possible | possibility | It could rain tomorrow! |
| **may** | to be allowed to | permission | May I use your phone please? |
| it is possible, probable | possibility, probability | It may rain tomorrow! |
| **might** | to be allowed to | more polite permission | Might I use your phone please? |
| it is possible, probable | weak possibility, probability | I might come and visit you in America next year, if I can save enough money. |
| **need** | necessary | necessity | Need I say more? |
| **need not** | not necessary | lack of necessity/absence of obligation | I need not buy any tomatoes. There are plenty in the fridge. |
| **should/ought to** | used to say or ask what is the correct or best thing to do | 50 % obligation | I should / ought to see a doctor. I have a terrible headache. |
| to suggest an action or to show that it is necessary | advice | You should / ought to revise your lessons |
| to be very probable | logical conclusion (deduction) | He should / ought to be very tired after such enormous work |
| **had better** | to suggest an action or to show that it is necessary | advice | You 'd better revise your lesson |

We use the modal **should** to **suggest** that something is true or will be true in the future, and to show you have reasons for your suggestion:

Ask Miranda. She **should know**.  
It's nearly six o'clock. They **should arrive** soon.

We use **should have** to talk about the **past**:

It's nearly eleven o'clock. They **should have arrived** by now

**NEEDN'T**

Mustn't and needn't / don't have to

We use mustn't to say that something is NOT ALLOWED and needn't (or don't need to) or don't  
have to to say that something is NOT NECESSARY:  
• You mustn't walk on the grass here.  
• You mustn't put anything on the shelves until the glue has set hard.  
• They proved that watching a chess match needn't be boring.  
• We needn't go into details now, but we seem to agree on the general principles.

Need, needn't, and don't need to / don't have to  
Need can be used as a modal verb (before a bare infinitive) or as an ordinary verb. Compare:  
• You needn't speak so loudly. (= modal verb)  
• She needn't come with us if she doesn't want to. (= modal verb)  
• She's thirsty. She needs a drink. (= ordinary verb)  
• Jim and Bob are here. They say they need to see you urgently. (= ordinary verb)

When it is a modal verb need is most commonly used in negative sentences, although it is  
sometimes also used in questions:  
• Need you go home so soon? (or, more commonly Do you have to go...?)  
• Need I say more? (or, more commonly Do I have to say...?)

We can use either needn't or don't have to when we say that is unnecessary to do something:  
• It would be good to see you, but g y , yyo u needn't ((or don't have to) come if you're busy.  
• You needn't (or don't have to) whisper. Nobody can hear us.

Compare these uses of needn't and don't need to.  
To give permission not to do something we can use either needn't or don't need to:  
• You needn't cut the grass, I'll do it later. /  
• You don't need to cut the grass, I'll do it later. /

To talk about a general necessity,  
we prefer don't need to:  
You don't need to be over 18 to get into a disco. /  
You needn't be over 18 to get into a disco. X  
Didn't need to / didn't have to and need not have